"Gee! They're All in Love with Phantoms!": How the Fantasies Have Constructed the Love Triangle in Hardy's "On the Western Circuit"

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Abstract

In this paper, Lacan's and Žižek's theorizations about fantasy will be applied to examine how the fantasies of the leading characters in Thomas Hardy's "On the Western Circuit" have constructed their love triangle. First, according to Lacan, the subject is barred/castrated because (s)he has internalized the lack, namely, the object a, from which the subject's desire arises. When the subject misrecognizes something as the object a, (s)he will have a fantasy. If we apply Lacan's formula of fantasy ($ ◇ a) to the case scenario of love in the text, we will discover that Raye desires both Anna and Mrs. Harnham, and that they both desire Raye. That is, they have become each other's substitutes for the object a, or their fantasies. A close look at this love triangle will reveal that on the one side of Raye and Anna, the key lies in their gaze, which leads to the subject's desire or fantasy. As for the other side of Raye and Mrs. Harnham, their correspondence is responsible for the developments of their fantasies. Last but not least, as Raye learns the truth at the end of the story, he is, according to Žižek, in a typical case scenario of "traversing the fantasy." That is, his fantastic world as well as the love triangle disintegrates, and the remains of his reality have become a traumatic experience.

Keywords: love triangle, Lacan, Žižek, lack/castration, desire, fantasy, $ ◇ a, gaze, correspondence

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> On Friday, as soon as he had got himself up as he thought Sue would like to see him . . . he set out, notwithstanding that the evening was wet . . . he knew that he loved her . . . but he knew in a moment that they were Sue and Philloston.
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> ——Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, 89.

> Often in fantasies, common everyday activities are included in order to lend more credence to the story.
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> ——Karl Beckson & Arthur Ganz, *Literary Terms*, 88.

Introduction

One of Thomas Hardy's major novels, *Jude the Obscure* (1895), thematicizes two love triangles: Jude, Sue, and Mr. Philloston; Jude, Sue, and Arabella. With the two love triangles intertwined with each other, *Jude the Obscure* has presented us with the motif of failed marriage and social transgression. (That's precisely why some critics have shed light on the revolutionary aspects of this novel, thinking that Hardy has "put a free spirit against an oppressive society, the ethereal against commonplace and material" (Heilman 210)). Likewise, one of Hardy's minor short stories, "On the Western Circuit" (1891), also centralizes the theme of a love triangle, and the same motif of failed marriage and social transgression is also touched on, at least by implication. On the other hand, Beckson and Ganz have pointed out that the term fantasy, if used literarily, must include real-life activities in order to render the story more credible. Similarly, the term fantasy, if used psychoanalytically, is entangled with our reality. In this paper, Lacan's and Žižek's theorizations about fantasy will be applied to see how the fantasies of the leading characters in Hardy's "On the Western Circuit" have constructed their love triangle.

Castration, Lack, Desire, and Fantasy

To fully grasp the psychoanalytical conceptions of fantasy, we must

start with Lacan's theorizations about castration. First, it is erroneous to associate Lacan's concept of castration solely with the phallus. Instead, Lacan asserts that "castration originates . . . the ensuing recognition of a 'lack'" (Grigg 58). That is, castration has to be understood as a lack, which, in Lacan's opinion, is "the very pillar of the signifier. In other words, the whole truth would be the signifier + castration/lack" (Zupančič 166). If the lack is an inherent attribute of any signifier, then the subject is certainly no exception. Before entering the Symbolic Order, the subject has already been "castrated" or suffered a lack. This is what Lacan terms a "barred subject" or a "$" in *Écrits* (306). Lacan explicitly points out that the $ is formed because of "the element that is initially isolated by the subject . . . as being by its very nature alien" (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII* 62). That is, the subject is "barred" because it is deprived of this alien element, which the subject holds very dear. Drawing on Lacan's Seminar on *Transference*, Žižek reasserts that the "barred" subject is someone "deprived of what matters to him most." Above all, the sacrificed object is the *object petit a* (*Enjoy Your Symptoms* 171). Žižek's observation must be supplemented with Lacan's points of view in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, where Lacan states "The *object* (*petit*) *a* is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of the lack . . ." (103). In addition, Lacan further elaborates on his point, indicating that the *object a* is "a small part of the subject that detaches itself from him while remaining his, still retained" (62). To sum up, Lacan believes that the (barred) subject will internalize his lack to be a lost object. And as far as the subject is concerned, this lost object is his *object petit a*. At this point, the relationship between the subject and his *object petit a* vacillates between the reality principle and the pleasurable principle. The former leads the subject to examine the reality so as to make sure that his *object petit a* remains in it, while the latter prods the subject into an endless pursuit of it (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII* 61-63). Here by the word "endless," I mean that in Lacan's opinion, the subject's lost object or *object a* can never be found, "It is in its nature that the object as such is lost. It will never be found again. . . . It is to be found at the most as something

missed". On the other hand, "One doesn't find it, but only its pleasurable associations. It is in this state of wishing for it and waiting for it that, in the name of the pleasure principle, the optimum tension will be sought" (63). Here, Lacan's so-called "optimum tension" is the barred subject's desire. That is to say, the *object a* is the cause of desire of the "$." Alain Badiou indicates that desire is "the principle of the being of the divided body" ("What Is Love" 60). Richard Boothby offers a more detailed explanation. In analyzing Lacan's conceptions of *object a,* Boothby first points out, "Lacan emphasizes the retroactive character of the *object a,* describing it as the "object-cause" of desire." Then he further explains, "Lacan insists that there is always already an object of desire in relation to which the desiring subject is constituted in the first place. But not just any subject. The object that functions as the cause of desire is a primordially lost or essentially lacking object . . ." And the *object a* simply fits this profile because it is "the perpetually absent locus around which the drives revolve" ("Figuration of the *Object a*" 161). To put it simply, desire arises from the fact that the "$" has a loss or a lack. Žižek points out that "in the case of *object a* as the object cause of desire, we have an object which is originally lost, which coincides with its own loss, which emerges as lost . . ." ("*Object a* in Social Links" 117). According to Žižek, the *object a* is a loss or lack the "$" is driven to fill, in the course of which the "$" becomes a desiring subject.

Only from the concept of desire can we move on to that of fantasy. To elaborate on the nature of fantasy, Žižek, in his "The Seven Veils of Fantasy," gives us seven fundamental features of fantasy. The first one is, "The fantasy is a transcendental schematism." Borrowing a Kantian term a "transcendental schematism," Žižek concludes, "A fantasy constitutes our desire, provides its coordinates, i.e. it literally 'teaches us how to desire'" (191). Žižek believes that fantasy is the guiding system of our desire; it tells us what to desire and enables us to become desiring subjects. Perhaps we can interpret Žižek's view this way: when a subject mistakenly sees an object (s)he encounters as his or her lost object/ *object a,* (s)he will have a fantasy. Juan-David Nasio

describes this mistake as a the-subject-is-the-object case scenario (104).[1] Most of all, the subject fantasizes about an object because (s)he misrecognizes it as the *object a* and eager to fill the void or lack it stands for. It echoes Žižek's metaphor, "Fantasy provides desire with its coordinates." That is, the fantasy is created to misinform the subject of the whereabouts of the object, which the subject has identified as the *object a* purely by mistake. In other words, as Žižek states "The *object a* . . . sets our desire in motion" (214), we can also say that fantasy has fulfilled exactly the same function.

It is noteworthy that Lacan's formula of fantasy in his *Écrits: A Selection*: $ ◇ a (313), is actually constructed upon the interrelationship between lack/castration, desire, and fantasy, which I have reviewed previously. In this formula, the barred subject ($) pursues the *object a* (a), namely, the object cause of his or her desire, as I have argued previously. Mladen Dolar views this formula, the Lacanian logic of fantasy from this perspective:

> . . . fantasy, in Lacan's view, is precisely something that confronts the subject with being—a being heterogeneous to signifiers and their play, their differentiality, etcetera; and on the other hand, a being irreducible to objectivity, to the (imaginary) counterpart of consciousness, the perceived being that one can lay one's hands on and which one can manipulate, or which can be submitted to scientific investigation. Lacan . . . proposed a rudimentary formula of fantasy, $ ◇ a—the subject confronted with that being, that bit of the Real, which s/he tries to cope with in fantasy. (15)

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[1] Éric Laurent elucidates a similar idea by drawing on Lacan's conception of a child's implication in the mother's fantasy. According to Laurent, it is in this case where the child becomes the mother's 'object' and reveals this object's truth. The child realizes the presence of the *object a* in fantasy. By substituting himself for this object, he saturates the mode of lack in which the mother's desire specifies itself. See Laurent, 247.

In the quoted passage above, Dolar has gained an insight into the nature of the *object a*. He has pointed out that it is a being outside the signifying chain, or a bit of the Real. On the other hand, it is irreducible to objectivity. Thus, the subject is prone to substitute it with something perceivable or even manipulable, in the course of which the fantasy arises. In other words, fantasy is a facilitator of the subject's confrontation with the *object a*, which we think is buried in the reality. That's precisely why Žižek argues, "For Lacan, fantasy is not simply a work of imagination as opposed to hard reality . . . fantasy is, rather, the little piece of imagination by which we gain access to reality—the frame that guarantees our access to reality, our 'sense of reality'" ("Is it Possible to Traverse the Fantasy in Cyberspace" 122). To sum up, fantasy is the link between the subject and the reality; it can enable the subject to adjust the reality to the extent of our satisfaction. (In my opening paragraph, the literary term "fantasy" is entangled with the reality, and so is the psychoanalytic term "fantasy." The above is its major entanglement with the reality.)

Under such circumstances, the symbol ◇ in the formula is a signifying process (Hu 68). Dolar also points out that it is "the chain of signifiers" that "is always prone to extension, without an ultimate signifier that could stop its gliding." Dolar notes that "the lack and the object, never fit or make a whole" (16). That is, the subject will commence an interminable process of substituting objects for the *object a*. In his *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek affirms this point of view, "As the saying goes, desire is an infinite metonymy, it slides from one object to another . . . [*it is*] the endless sliding from one signifier to another" (104, *italics mine*). Because desire endlessly slides from one signifier to another, Žižek proposes that the desiring subject must occupy a multitude of positions, which is another feature of fantasy in his "The Seven Veils of Fantasy," "More radically, fantasy creates a multitude of 'subject-positions,' among which the (observing, fantasizing) subject can freely float. The subject is free to shift his or her identification from one to another" (193).[2] My point here is that

[2] Edward S. Casey and J. Melvin Woody assert that desire is inevitably marked

the metonymical float of desire and the desiring subject's multiple positions lay the foundation of the love triangle in Hardy's "On the Western Circuit."

The Desiring Subjects and Their Fantasies in the Love Triangle

In his "Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing," Žižek takes notice of the operations of the fantasy-matrix in the game of courtly love because the lady is an object of the man's desire (168). Paul Verhaeghe also emphasizes the woman's reduction to the man's *object a* in a love game; the man, assuming an almighty position, is "able to name her and provide her with an identity of her own" (46). Apparently, by "the woman's reduction to the man's *object a*," Verhaeghe means that the man, by using his capability of giving the woman an identity, actually debases her to be a mere substitute for his own *object a*, or an object of his desire. If the woman in a relationship becomes an object of the man's desire, theoretically the (desiring) man can take multiple subject positions, and his desire can move from one signifier/woman to another. In Hardy's "On the Western Circuit," Charles Bradford Raye, a young lawyer, meets a maid-servant, Anna, at a fair of Manchester. Right there he falls for this "interesting creature rather than a handsome woman; dark-eyed, thoughtful, and with sensitive lips" (115). After returning to his London abode, he thinks of "that trusting girl at Manchester again and again," "oppressed by absurd fondness for her." (120). "At length he sent her a brief line, positively requesting her to write" (121). Unfortunately, "she could neither read nor write" (123). Therefore, her mistress, Mrs. Edith Harnham, writes Raye back in place of her. "It was the most charming little missive he had ever received from woman . . . the ensemble of the letter it was which won him" (121). From then on, Mrs. Harnham has kept writing Raye for Anna. "The same process of manufacture was accordingly repeated by Anna and her mistress, and continued for several weeks in succession . . ." (124), until Raye falls in love with the author of these letters, Mrs. Harham,

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by the play of the signifier: "The dialectic of desire shows it to be the desire of the Other: which means that it is marked indelibly by the play of the signifier, the intervention of language" (218).

thinking "she was such a treasure" (127).[3] In a bizarre way, Raye desires both Anna and Mrs. Harnham; both of them have become the objects of Raye's desire, or the subjects of Raye's fantasies. Because both of them are merely temporary substitutes for Raye's *object a,* Raye is able to vacillate between the positions of their lovers, with his desire flowing metonymically between them.

Thus, the love triangle "On the Western Circuit" has been mapped out. We should note that this love triangle must be viewed strictly from a readerly perspective. In other words, on the part of Raye this love triangle never exists until the end of the story. On the other hand, we readers know for sure that the cases of Anna and Mrs. Harnham have to be treated respectively, and that Raye's fantasies are in fact the major building blocks of this love triangle. John Plotz points out that "Charles falls in love with what he thinks he sees of Anna on the roundabout" (369). As for Mrs. Harnham and Raye, her love "letters can no more be reproduced as mere words on a page than the vision of Anna or of Charles on that roundabout could be reduced to a series of pictures" (383). Both Anna and Mrs. Harnham mistakenly coincide with Raye's *object a,* Raye's fantasies emerge. Raye thinks that he falls in love with what he has seen or read, but in reality it's mere his own fantasies that he loves. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan uses the word *phantasy* all the time. For example, drawing on the instance of the *Wolf Man* in Freud's work, Lacan argues, "The exceptional importance of this case in Freud's work is to show that it is in relation to the real that the level of *phantasy* functions. The real supports the *phantasy*, the *phantasy* protects the real" (41, *italics mine*). Hu takes notice of Lacan's word

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[3] Peter Widdowson does textual criticism of Hardy's "On the Western Circuit." According to the commonest version of the story, Mrs. Harnham is unhappily married to a wealthy wine merchant, who is a lot older than she is. In addition, Raye pregnates Anna and then offers to marry her. Widdowson points out, "Hence, for the periodical version, Edith becomes a respectable widow who may quite properly harbor feelings for another man, and there is no hint of Anna becoming pregnant, merely that she pines for her young man away in London. Almost all of the erotic material outlined above, therefore, is also excised from the magazine" (376).

phantasy and argues that for Lacan, fantasy is like a phantom haunting the reality (57). If so, then Raye, to a certain extent, has fallen in love with two phantoms in his reality.

However, it is noteworthy that the case scenario in "On the Western Circuit" is not a reenactment of courtly love, where the woman can only be passively courted. In the first place, Anna and Raye do desire each other in the story. After Raye "had in brief won her, body and soul" (119), Anna "begged him to come to her again; entreated him; wept" (120). Anna cares about Raye so much that she can't let him know about her illiteracy. She tells Mrs. Harnham, "I should sink into the earth with shame if he knew that!" (123) or "He'd be ashamed of me, and never see me again!" (124). It is even more apparent how Raye and Mrs. Harnham/ the letter author desire each other. As Raye detects from the correspondence "a nobility of character that he had never dreamt of finding in womankind" (127), Mrs. Harnham realizes from reading the letters from Raye that "she had become possessed to the bottom of her soul with the image of a man to whom she was hardly so much as a name" (125). James Gibson believes that for Hardy, the love triangle is "a very old recipe but a very sound one" (42). H. M. Daleski sees Hardy's "recurrent triangular patterning of the love relationships," where "it is a man who is placed between two women." For Hardy this triangular patterning is basic, "seemly his instinctive means of grappling with the complexities of sexual relationships." In addition, Daleski reminds us that the women in such relationships "may be regarded as equivalents of the types of previously opposed men" (186); that is, their capabilities to love should not be underestimated. Hardy's typical triangular patterning of love lays the basis of "On the Western Circuit," and both Anna and Mrs. Harnham are eager to love. Siobhan Craft Brownson argues that in the story, Hardy has exhibited his creative abilities to foreground the issue of imagination. "Hardy, in fact, creates a new level of fraud in his story: self-fraud" (32-34). What Brownson attempts to tell us is that Raye, Anna, and Mrs. Harnham have all pushed their imagination to the extent of self-delusion. As Raye falls in love with his own fantasies, it is a simple deduction that both Anna and Mrs. Harnham fall in love with their own fantasies as well. To be more specific, Raye has

become the object of their desires or the substitute for their *object a*, making both of them the desiring subjects. In explicating the first veil of fantasy, "The Fantasy is a Transcendental Schematism," Žižek suggests that the desiring subject could be male or female, "On account of the lack of this universal formula, every individual has to invent a fantasy of his or her own . . ." ("The Seven Veils of Fantasy" 191). Once Anna and Mrs. Harnham both qualify as desiring subjects, then it is rather easy to see that they are both in love with the phantoms of their own creation, just like Raye. As I have said above, the word fantasy/*phantasy* is analogous to another word "phantom." Therefore, we can hereby utter what the title of my paper reads, "Gee! They're all in love with phantoms!"

Also, it is very clear that the love triangle in "On the Western Circuit" is actually constructed upon the leading characters' fantasies. It is from their own fantasies that a chain of events ensue in the story. Plenty of critics would view this love triangle from the perspective of Hardy's well-known philosophy of naturalism. For instance, George Levine sees Hardy's "often relentless exploitation of chance . . . to bring hero and heroine . . . to their frustration, their pain, and their deaths" ("Hardy and Darwin" 38). Michael Irwin observes that Hardy "conducts what amounts to a naturalistic experiment" in treating the subject of love; Hardy considers "love as an overwhelming and capricious power, the great source of human joy and grief" (194-97). J. Hillis Miller also states, "Hardy's fiction has a single theme: 'fascination.' Novel after novel tells the story of a love affair which emerges from the dreaming background of Wessex life and is followed to its predestined end" (114).[4] Jeans R. Brooks thinks that Hardy's naturalism philosophy of love is particularly applicable in viewing the love triangle in "On the Western Circuit": "Charles Raye, Anna, and her mistress [whirl] into

[4] For many critics, Hardy's naturalism shouldn't be equated with arrant pessimism. For example, Keith Wilson claims that "he was a thinker who found life so few and limited consolations as recurrently to figure consciousness as an ironic burden without which humanity might well have been far better." Then he says, "But on the other hand, there is an equally enduring sense in Hardy's work that the world's only hope of ultimate betterment resides entirely in that same questionable gift of consciousness" (3).

a merry-go-round of cross-purposes and passions as arbitrary as the stoker's whim" (146). That is, the twist of fate has brought Anna and Raye together; Anna happens to be illiterate, so Raye and Mrs. Harnham are chanced to fall in love through their correspondence. However, in this paper I choose to do a further examination of the root causes of their fantasies.

Gaze and Correspondence

In analyzing Franz Kafka's letters, Hu states that gaze and correspondence are the two major facilitators of Kafka's fantasies (68). I believe it is exactly the same case in Hardy's "On the Western Circuit." As a matter of fact, gaze and correspondence constitute the two sides of this love triangle. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan calls the gaze as "the *object a* in the field of the visible" (105). Then, drawing on Sartre, Lacan argues that "the gaze seems to possess such a privilege that it goes so far as to have me scotomized, I who look, the eye of him who sees me as object. I so far as I am under the gaze . . . I no longer see the eye that looks at me and, if I see the eye, the gaze disappears" (84). Jacques-Alain Miller states, "The gaze is anonymous. Behind this anonymity there is hidden . . . the Other's gaze." That is, the subject under gaze has become "an object in the world" (14).[5] Above all, when the subject looks at the object, the latter has already looked at the former from a place the former can't see (Evans 72). In other words, the gaze is of the object's, and it is, as Lacan says, "imagined by me in the field of the Other" (84). Then, Lacan associates the gaze with desire, stating that it is through the intervention of the gaze that the subject begins to sustain himself in a function of desire (84-85). To put it simply, the gaze can kick-start the subject's desire (Hu 70).

In "On the Western Circuit," the gaze serves as the cataclysm of Anna's

[5] Miller later critiques the episode about the gaze in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, which Lacan has used as an example. He says, "The Sartrian conjunction of gaze and judgment perhaps needs to be called into question, or at least unsettled, since it produces what looks like a slide from shame to guilt" (14).

and Raye's fantasies. Raye first meets Anna on the kaleidoscopic roundabout:

> The revolving figures passed before his eyes with an unexpected and quiet grace in a throng whose natural movements did not suggest gracefulness or quietude as a rule. . . . At first, it was difficult to catch a personality, but by and by the observer's eyes centered on the prettiest girl out of the several pretty ones revolving. . . . Having finally selected her, this idle spectator [Raye] studied her as well as he was able during each of her brief transits across his visual field. She was absolutely unconscious of everything save the act of riding: her features were rapt in an ecstatic dreaminess . . . it was a refreshing sensation to behold this young thing then and there, absolutely as happy as if she were in a Paradise. (111-12, italics mine)

Afterwards, "the pleasure-machine started again," and "the light-hearted girl, the figure of the handsome young man . . . gazed at each other with smiles . . ." (113). Here, Hardy has presented us with his vision of melodramatic intensity (Dolin 330), and it principally manifests itself not in character or plot, but in his genius for spectacle: striking "picture stories" (Gledhill 21-22).[6] In the quoted passage above, Hardy has given us a melodramatic vision, or a story-telling spectacle on the merry-go-round, where the vision of Raye and Anna "becomes inseparable from transience—that is, from new temporalities, speeds, experiences of flux and obsolescence, a new density and sedimentation of the structure of visual memory" (Crary 21). With the new temporalities and speeds on the merry-go-round, Anna's and Raye's visions have imprinted on their visual

[6] David Lodge compares Hardy's vision with "the visual effects characteristic of film." According to him, Hardy has created "a visualized world that is both recognizably 'real' and yet more vivid, intense and dramatically charged than our ordinary perception of the real world" (96).

memories with a new density. In the end, what is created is "a visual phantasm, an irreproducible and finally inexplicable occurrence" (Plotz 375). We have to know that Plotz's so-called "visual phantasm" practically amounts to Anna's and Raye's gazes, now that it fits the Lacanian definition of the gaze: it is an irreproducible and unexplainable occurrence in their imagination. In Hardy's works, gaze is often a key issue. "The lives of Hardy's characters are as frequently disrupted by their acts of observation as they are by being spied upon" (Levine, "Shaping Hardy's Art" 537). While Anna is under Raye's gaze, Raye is in a place Anna can't see. Anna can't see Raye's eyes looking at her, so his gaze gets to be sustained. In the end, Anna becomes an object, which is haunted by the phantom of Raye's gaze. After they have made each other's acquaintance, they gaze at each other on the merry-go-round. Their gazes are purely imaginary because both of them can claim, "You never look at me from the place from which I see you!" (Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 103). Above all, they lead to "passion, heart-ache, union, disunion, devotion, overpopulation, drudgery, content, resignation, despair" (114), namely, their overwhelming desires for each other. It is their gazes that have established them as the objects of each other's desires, and then set their fantasies in motion.

It is true that in the beginning of "On the Western Circuit," Mrs. Harnham and Raye have a few brief meetings, which stir her blood. For instance, after they meet by accident in the fair, Mrs. Harnham goes to her usual week-day service in Manchester cathedral, where "she again perceived him who had interested her . . . Mrs. Harnham was continually occupying her eyes with him, and wondered more than ever what had attracted him in her unfledged maid-servant" (118). However, it is also true that Mrs. Harnham and Raye haven't really fallen in love with each other until they have created their fantasies in their continuous correspondence. According to Franz Kafka, there are two categories of technologies: one is the technologies of presence, which bring people from one place to another and offer face-to-face, "natural communication." The train, the airplane, or the automobile falls into this category. The other is the technologies of absence, which separate the bodies from the transported information. The technologies of this kind include the

postal system, the telephone, the telegram, etc. Due to the distance and the absence, they will lead to what Kafka terms "ghostly communication" (182-83). As the term suggests, it should be a perfect seedbed for the development of fantasies, now that we've argued that fantasies are comparable to phantoms. It seems especially true in the case of Mrs. Harnham and Raye. Mrs. Harnham is hopelessly attracted Raye after she has made it a rule to write him in place of Anna.

> She was now clearly realizing that she had become possessed to the bottom of her soul with the image of a man to whom she was hardly so much as a name. . . . They were her own impassioned and pent-up ideas—lowered to monosyllabic phraseology in order to keep up the disguise . . . . (125-26)

Their correspondence gets more and more frequent. After Anna is compelled to leave the house on account of her pregnancy, Mrs. Harnham starts to write Raye without Anna's knowledge of it:

> Thus it befell that Edith Harnham found herself in the strange position of having to correspond, under no supervision by the real woman, with a man not her husband, in terms which were virtually those of a wife, concerning a corporeal condition that was not Edith's at all . . . . Throughout this correspondence . . . the high-strung Edith Harnham lived in the ecstasy of fancy; the vicarious intimacy engendered such a flow of passionateness as was never exceeded. (128-29)

When Kafka calls the postal system "ghostly communication," he actually highlights two key attributes of letters: absence and distance. William Merrill Decker thinks the two attributes have especially manifested themselves in the 19th century, when "separated parties more commonly created elaborate texts of their friendships" because of formidable distances and "the presence and absence of one person to another" (4). Richard Hardack, elaborating on

Decker's point of view, concludes that the correspondents of the 19th century "might devote considerable writing space to their concern with separation and all it symbolized" (143). Of course, the writing space is built upon distance and absence. Žižek regards distance as the underlying principle of fantasy. He enumerates the seven features of fantasy in his "The Seven Veils of Fantasies;" above all, he argues, "The common thread of all these seven features consists in the basic paradox of a fantasy formation: in order for a fantasy to be operative, it has to remain 'implicit' i. e., a distance must be maintained between it and the explicit symbolic texture sustained by it" (204). Both Decker and Hardack argue that distance can open up considerable writing space in the correspondence. That is to say, correspondence is actually a perfect seedbed for fantasies; the existence of fantasies is guaranteed in the writing space of correspondence because letters offer them the necessary distance.

While Mrs. Harnham is writing Raye, he is in London. In her letters, she has possessively fantasized about Raye being her husband, making a delusive attempt to transfer her emotional sensibility onto Raye (Brady 124). That is, their distance has kept her fantasy alive, and her fantasy is getting fueled after she has usurped Anna's identity in the correspondence with Raye. Elizabeth Hewitt points out, "Letters necessarily emphasize social mediation in its two requisite generic features: an address (or superscription) to another person, and a signature (or subscription) that assigns the writer's relationship to the recipient" (2). Clearly, Mrs. Harnham has literally hijacked this social mediation; under the protection of distance and Raye's absence, she has managed to steal the superscription, subscription, and eventually Anna's relationship with Raye. Penelope Pether thinks Mrs. Harnham changes from "protector to pander" after this usurpation (35). Indeed, when Mrs. Harnham agrees to write for Anna at first, she merely wants to protect her and "keep alive his [*Raye's*] attachment to the girl if possible" (124, *italics mine*); however, in the end, she does so to pander to her own ecstasy of fancy as well as the vicarious pleasure and passion she can derive from the correspondence. In the end, she has fallen for her fantasy or the phantom of her own creation in the correspondence.

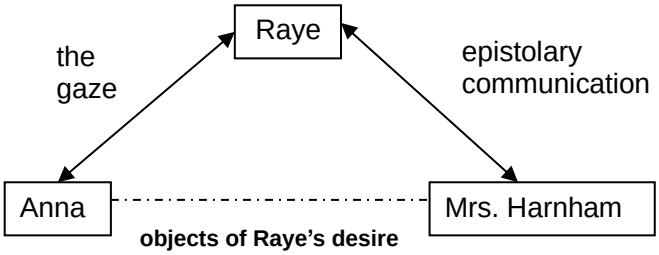
As Mrs. Harnham loves a phantom in the correspondence, so does Raye. It is true that acts of epistolary transmission “are also acts of transformation because a letter’s original meaning and intention are never completely received” (Duyfhuizen 49). In addition, “there is no reason to suppose that the letter means anything” to the man because he “will try to put meaning into this empty space” (Leader 106). However, the case of Raye is exactly the opposite. Feeling the full power of Mrs. Harnham’s love between the lines in her letters, Raye is completely spellbound. “The letter’s combination of unaffected style and graceful expression ultimately exert a potent influence on him” (Brownson 37). Through his exchange of letters with Mrs. Harnham, “in spirit” he has fallen in love with her. According to Plotz, “the simulation of letter-writing mimics that simulation of affection that takes place at the roundabout” (383). On Raye’s part, as his gaze enables him to create a fantasy out of Anna on the merry-go-round, his correspondence with Mrs. Harnham leads him to create a similar fantasy. In the case of the latter, distance and absence also play a crucial role: they led him to mistakenly superimpose Mrs. Harnham the writer of the letters upon Anna. Raye is led to believe “that, with her powers of development, after a little private training in the social forms of London under his supervision . . . she would make as good a professional man’s wife as could be desired” (130). Thus, this erroneous superimposition arising from distance and absence has kept his fantasy alive.

As a matter of fact, the correspondence between Raye and Mrs. Harnham doesn’t just give ample space for their fantasies; it also energizes them. For one thing, correspondence is a series of exchanges of letters, which can’t possibly be simultaneous. Janet Girkin Altman views this exchange as an epistolary contract; that is, the reader/receiver of a letter is required to reply (89). Peter Brooks notices that the writer of a letter has to respect his or her mail receiver, for his act of communication can’t be consummated without the mail receiver’s act of reading (542). Both Altman and Brooks stress back-and-forth process of correspondence. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak draws an analogue between this process and Freud’s description of his grandson’s *fort*/*da* game. In his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud

describes how his grandson, Ernst, "had an occasional disturbing habit of taking any small objects he could get hold of and throwing them away . . . so that hunting for his toys and picking them up was often quite a business" (8). As Ernst's game is going on and on, Freud perceives that the compulsion to repeat "can never . . . have brought satisfaction even to instinctual impulses . . ." (14). Based on Freud's theorization, Spivak argues, "The un-pleasure of the *fort* . . . is for the sake of the assurance of the pleasure of the *da*, more pleasing than the pleasure "itself." This renders the phenomenal identity of pleasure undecidable; and keeps the game forever in-complete . . ." (30). Hu frames Spivak's argument with epistolary exchange: as we've argued previously, the desiring subject will endlessly substituting the objects of his desire for his *object a*. The reason why this substitution is endless is that desire can never be satisfied; hence, what is fulfilled in a fantasy is the postponement of satisfaction as well as the perpetuation of desire (Meyers 94-95). In the context of epistolary exchange: the mail writer has to wait because the reply can't possibly be simultaneous. Just as Ernst throws away the object and gets it back, the mail writer sends his or her letters (*fort*) and gets replies (*da*), in the course of which his pleasure (of getting the replies) offsets his un-pleasure (of waiting for the replies). Ernst's game or the mail writer's correspondence will go on and on because the pleasures they get will never satisfy their desires; they just postpone the satisfaction of them. Therefore, Hu concludes that the exchange of mail is a perfect vehicle for creating fantasies (71). It's precisely the same case with Raye and Mrs. Harnham. Their correspondence goes on for four months (130) and inevitably pushes them closer to their fantasies for each other. Mrs. Harnham "opened each letter, read it as if intended for herself, and replied from the promptings of her own heart" (128). Raye "had a tender regard for the country girl, and it grew more tender than ever when he found her apparently capable of expressing the deepest sensibilities in the simplest words" (129). Obviously, their correspondence isn't just a virtual space where their fantasies/phantoms dwell; it also serves the function of empowering them. While they are waiting for the replies, the satisfaction of their desires for each other gets postponed. If their desires delay getting satisfied all the time,

the objects of their desires will also continue to be there. That is to say, as their correspondence intensifies, not only will their fantasies remain but also they will be empowered.

Now, it is about time that I recapitulated my argument with the following figure:



Certainly, this figure is a representation of the love triangle in “On the Western Circuit.” I use the two-way arrows ⟷ to indicate the mutuality of the process: with the intervention of the gaze, Anna becomes the object of Raye’s desire, and vice versa; with the intervention of epistolary communication, Mrs. Harnham becomes the object of Raye’s desire, and vice versa. As for the broken line ..... on the bottom, I use it to identify both Anna and Mrs. Harnham as the objects of Raye’s desire. Now that the two “becoming” processes of the objects of desires will lead to fantasies, this love triangle also configures the fantasies in the story. It illustrates how the leading characters of the story have created and fallen in love with their own fantasies. Therefore, the love triangle in Hardy’s “On the Western Circuit” is constructed upon the fantasies of Raye’s, Anna’s and Mrs. Harnham’s.

The Collapse of the Love Triangle

In the end of the story, Raye finally meets Mrs. Harnham at the registry-office. “Raye discovered a strange and secret gravitation between himself and Anna’s friend [*Mrs. Harnham*]” (133, *italics mine*). There, he discovers the truth that Anna doesn’t write any of the letters, and that he and

Mrs. Harnham "are friends──lovers──devoted lovers──by correspondence!" (135). At last, Mrs. Harnham "put up her mouth," and Raye "kissed her long" on the lips. Shrugging his shoulders, Raye says, "It serves me right!" (136). Raye has accepted the truth with unusual calmness as though it is his only way out of his predicament.[7] And his tragically frustrating life is "a closed system of disappointment from which only death offers an escape" (Lodge, 108).

Indeed, Raye boldly faces the outcome that he might be ruined (136), both socially and professionally because he's married a girl of a different class from his.[8] From a somewhat naturalism perspective, this ending truly "enacts a rhetoric of sympathy and irony in which no moral judgment is made" (Harvey 118). On the other hand, it is also a consequence of Raye's shattered fantasy. With Raye's fantasy removed from the equation, the love triangle in turn collapses. According to Žižek, this is a typical case scenario of "traversing the fantasy," ". . . when the phantasmic frame disintegrates, the subject undergoes a 'loss of reality' and starts to perceive reality as an 'irreal' nightmarish universe with no firm ontological foundation; this nightmarish universe is not "pure fantasy but, on the contrary, that which remains of reality after reality is deprived of its support in fantasy" (*The Plague of Fantasies* 84). Bruce Fink terms this process "the reconfiguration of fantasy," in which "the divided subject . . . subjectifies trauma, takes the traumatic event upon him or herself . . ." (255-56). Evidently, what we see in the end of "On the Western Circuit" is Raye's traverse of his fantasy: as he learns the truth, his own fantastic world disintegrates (the same way as the love

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[7] Perhaps it is at this point that Raye is contrasted with Jude in *Jude the Obscure*. In the novel, Jude's tragedy is "of missed fulfillment, of frustration," which "is the permanent condition" of his life (Alvarez 113-14).

[8] Roger Ebbason comments on Hardy's ambivalent attitude towards the issue of class in Voctorian society as well as its thematic role in his fiction, "It was this class which Hardy, in a creative state of self-division, both envied and critiqued, and it is his ambivalence which motivates the fiction, a body of work in which use-value—the unmediated relation of the worker to his or her product—gives place to exchange value" (167).

triangle). Without the support of his fantasy, the remains of his reality are an extremely traumatic experience and a nightmarish prospect of him. And his way of internalizing his trauma is to give Mrs. Harnham a long kiss and repeat “reading over all those sweet letters . . . signed Anna” (137).

Conclusion

Renata Salecl connects love to the Other this way, “As such the subject is split, barred, marked by a fundamental lack. And it is in this lack that one encounters the object cause of desire. . . . The enchantment of love is how the subject deals . . . with his or her own lack, and . . . with the lack in the loved one” (191). Salecl’s theorization enables us to apply Lacan’s formula of fantasy to the case scenario of a love affair. Lovers often have fantasies because they tend to mistake their loved ones, or the objects of their desires, for their *object a*. And Hardy’s “On the Western Circuit” exemplifies this case scenario. Through the agency of the gaze, Anna and Raye have become the objects of each other’s desire and created their own fantasies for each other; through the agency of epistolary communication, the same thing happens to Raye and Mrs. Harnham. Therefore, Hardy’s “On the Western Circuit” is a story where all of the leading characters have fallen in love with their own fantasies; it also a story that presents the audience with a love triangle constructed on the fantasies. In the end, Raye traverses his fantasy, learning the truth. With the collapse of the love triangle, Raye chooses to deal with the consequence by himself.

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